

VZCZCXRO4162
PP RUEHSL
DE RUEHRO #1279/01 3241426
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 201426Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY ROME
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2908
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0557
RUEHMIL/AMCONSUL MILAN PRIORITY 0330
RUEHFL/AMCONSUL FLORENCE PRIORITY 3896
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES PRIORITY 4110
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 3061
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ROME 001279

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/20/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [NATO](#) [IT](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN: ITALY BRACED FOR TROOP REQUEST,
POSITIONED TO RESPOND POSITIVELY DESPITE BUDGET CUTS

REF: A. USNATO 507
[¶B.](#) ROME 1177
[¶C.](#) ROME 1274
[¶D.](#) ROME 1072
[¶E.](#) ROME DAILY REPORT 11/12/09

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Elizabeth Dibble for Reasons 1.4
(B) and (D)

[¶1.](#) (C) Summary: The GOI is braced for an eventual request for more troops in Afghanistan, but its initial offer will likely be modest due to political, budgetary, and structural constraints on Italian troop deployment capability. We can and should push the Italians beyond their current comfort zone, but should also be realistic about what we can expect. FM Frattini told the Ambassador on October 22 that Italy could accommodate an increase from 3,100 to 3,500 troops in ISAF if NATO agreed on the requirement for more resources before the end of the year, when the Italian missions abroad mandate is up for renewal. Since that meeting, Italy has started to draw down its 500-man Election Security Forces, making 3,500 a more distant but still attainable goal. Anything above the 3,500 level will require a more robust effort on our part to provide political top-cover for GOI ministers who have not yet prepared public opinion for a substantial increase. The planned return of up to 900 Italian troops from Kosovo after January 2010 and 200-300 troops from Lebanon in 2010 would theoretically help offset eventual Italian increases in ISAF. The November 11 meeting of the Supreme Defense Council reaffirmed Italy's commitment to missions in Lebanon and Afghanistan in the face of a difficult budgetary situation, but gave little clear indication of how to pay for it. Although public and parliamentary support for missions abroad remains reasonably strong, maintaining a high level of GOI commitment in Afghanistan, Lebanon and elsewhere in the face of Italy's ongoing economic slump will require sustained, high-level USG engagement with the Italian political leadership, a group that traditionally places great value on its personal ties with U.S. counterparts. End Summary.

The GOI Braces Itself for the "Ask"

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[¶2.](#) (C) Despite public pronouncements by PM Berlusconi, MOD La Russa and others that Italy is doing enough in ISAF and other countries should pull their weight, the GOI clearly expects to be asked to do more in Afghanistan, which remains its

greatest overseas priority commitment. Although Italy has reached what Italian politicians routinely call their Parliamentary "cap" on overseas deployments (about 9,000 troops), this has not prevented the GOI from contemplating further increases. (In fact, there is no legal cap but a gentleman's agreement that expenditures will remain roughly within a 8,000-9,000 troop band; the Italian military's deployment structure theoretically can sustain a presence of up to 12,000 troops overseas.)

13. (C) The anticipated return of up to 900 troops from Kosovo in January when KFOR reaches Gate 1 of its projected drawdown, combined with the return of 200-300 headquarters troops from UNIFIL when Spain assumes command in early 2010, will give Italy a windfall that it was hoping to use for budget savings. The GOI's decision to reduce its UNIFIL contingent by a smaller margin than had been anticipated in 2010 (to about 1,900 troops) -- a decision made largely due to our request -- gives Italy less room for maneuver and should be weighed against any potential increase in ISAF. However, Frattini's recent statement to the Ambassador that Italy could increase troop levels in Afghanistan to 3,500 clearly indicates that the GOI is prepared to use some of that savings to plus up its ISAF contribution while still remaining under the 9,000 "cap." (Refs A, B) (Note: at the time Italy still had 400 Election Support Forces plus enablers, many of whom have begun to return. However, because of troop rotations, the overall force level has remained more or less constant at about 3,100.) In addition, Italy has some 5,600 troops deployed internally for anti-crime patrols, garbage cleanup in Naples, and earthquake relief in L'Aquila -- missions that are maintained primarily for political effect but have the advantage of having little impact on the defense budget. If needed, Italy could

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theoretically draw on these reserves to relieve pressure on units rotating abroad.

14. (C) The biggest potential obstacle to an Italian troop increase in ISAF is neither the troop cap nor budget cuts, but rather mustering the political will to (1) put more troops in harm's way and (2) come up with the necessary funding while practicing fiscal austerity in other areas. The September 17 bombing in Kabul that killed six Italian soldiers led to a national outpouring of grief accompanied by statements from Berlusconi's junior coalition partner (Northern League) in favor of bringing troops home. Since then the Northern League has reassured us of its support for the mission and talk of troop withdrawal has all but disappeared from the press and Parliament (Refs C, D). Recent Pew Research Center polling shows that while 56 per cent of Italians would like to see troops removed as soon as possible (roughly in line with other Western European publics), 71 per cent regard a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as a threat to their national security -- more than any other country polled besides the U.S.

Political Support: Strong But Casualty-Averse

15. (C) Parliamentary support for the mission on both sides of the political divide remains strong, but future requests for troop increases will likely face greater Parliamentary scrutiny, in part because of the perceived lack of U.S. leadership on the issue since the August 20 elections. MOD and MFA officials have fretted over what they view as an excessively long strategy review in Washington. However, a strong show of unity from NATO in support of the new USG approach will be sufficient to carry the day in Parliament. Politicians on both the left and right, however, will not hesitate to call for a "rethinking" of the mission if public opinion turns sour on Afghanistan as a result of further casualties or if political points can be scored by portraying the defense budget as a tradeoff for pensions and social services. PM Berlusconi's ongoing political and legal

troubles could complicate the picture further by making him less inclined to show assertive leadership on this issue than he has in the past.

¶16. (C) It will be more difficult to convince the GOI to increase significantly its financial support for Afghan National Army expansion. MFA contacts are skeptical of the Afghan government's ability to sustain an ANA of the dimensions described in NATO discussions of the McChrystal report (400,000) -- regardless of whether donors can provide the needed funding -- and of the wisdom of arming a force that large in a country as unstable as Afghanistan. The current Italian contribution to the NATO ANA Trust Fund (USD 2 million in 2009) falls well short of the USG ask for Italy of USD 100 million per year; Italian officials routinely tell us that Japan and the Gulf States should bear the cost of ANA growth.

Budgetary Constraints: More Imagined than Real, But Political Will Weak to Reallocate

¶17. (C) Faced with a stagnant economy, one of the highest public debt-to-GDP ratios in Europe, and a bloated public sector, the Berlusconi government does face real economic constraints. However, years of budget cuts have hit the defense budget disproportionately hard, resulting in a steady decrease in defense spending as a share of GDP from about 2 per cent in 2005 to just over 1 per cent in 2009. These cuts should not be seen as the inevitable result of Italy's macroeconomic difficulties. They are, instead, the result of a resource allocation decision to spend increasingly less on defense. Even within current macroeconomic constraints, the GOI could decide to significantly increase defense spending. This political choice to sacrifice defense capability -- rather than make politically unpopular cuts to social programs and sources of state patronage -- have thus far not seriously affected overseas deployments, which have remained steady at about 8,000-9,000 per year and which are funded separately from the main defense budget through extraordinary appropriations. Strong political support for the missions

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means that the budget knife has been redirected elsewhere -- primarily to operations and maintenance, which most defense experts tell us is bound to affect Italy's ability to support deployments to far-flung places like Afghanistan.

¶18. (C) However, as a special reserve fund set aside to help defray deployment costs begins to run out in 2009, Italian budget cutters have revisited military missions abroad as a possible area for reductions. When Ambassador Thorne called key government ministers November 10-12 to express concern over rumors that the Finance Ministry was seeking to reduce overseas troop levels by up to 25 per cent, he was told by Finance Minister Tremonti that he (Tremonti) was not the one seeking a reduction. On November 11 the Supreme Defense Council, which includes President Napolitano, PM Berlusconi, FM Frattini, MOD La Russa and MinFin Tremonti, met and issued a statement reaffirming Italian commitment to Afghanistan and Lebanon and stating that continued funding for the missions would be drawn from, among other sources, hypothetical savings to be gleaned from an ongoing MOD structural review designed to rationalize defense expenditures (Ref E). While the threat of near-term budget-driven troop reductions may have subsided, FM Frattini and MOD La Russa, the two traditional proponents of strong overseas troop presence, may have a tougher time pitching an ISAF increase to the rest of the Cabinet.

Overseas Deployments a Source of Pride and Prestige for GOI

¶19. (C) Comment: The GOI places great pride in its 9,000 troops deployed overseas. In their public statements,

President Napolitano, PM Berlusconi and other senior leaders routinely ascribe much of the international prestige and foreign policy influence that Italy enjoys to this large overseas military presence, which compares favorably to that of any other European country. Italy is a leading contributor to all of the most important international military operations (ISAF, UNIFIL, KFOR), and although it withdrew its 2,700 troops from Iraq in 2006, it remains the leading non-U.S. contributor to the NATO Training Mission in Iraq. However, this level of commitment faces a real threat from Italy's chronic economic crisis and the GOI's resource allocation decisions. The GOI needs to come to terms with the fact that if it expects to participate effectively in these overseas missions, it must allocate sufficient resources to support them. Continued high-level U.S. engagement with Italy is essential not only to keeping Italy engaged in Afghanistan, but to keep it from slipping from the top tier of European contributors to global security to that of the also-rans. End Comment.

THORNE